

VZCZCXRO2514

RR RUEHAG RUEHAST RUEHDA RUEHDBU RUEHDF RUEHFL RUEHIK RUEHKW RUEHLA
RUEHLN RUEHLZ RUEHROV RUEHSR RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHVB #1260/01 2910719
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 180719Z OCT 06
FM AMEMBASSY ZAGREB
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6803
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ZAGREB 001260

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [HR](#) [POLITICAL](#) [PARTIES](#) [ELECTIONS](#)

SUBJECT: FAR RIGHT POSITIONS ITSELF FOR 2007 ELECTIONS

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED - Please handle accordingly

¶1. (U) Summary and comment: The Croatian Party of Rights (HSP) has consolidated its status as a major right-wing political party and gained greater acceptability as a democratic political entity, although some statements made by its leaders occasionally echo its extreme nationalist past. Domestically, HSP's record in the past six months has been mixed. In April, HSP performed poorly at partial early elections in three localities. By late summer, however, a credible survey identified HSP as the third most popular party with 10 percent of popular support. The poll also found that HSP voters are the only ones who support a coalition with the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ). This is good news for the HSP, but less so for the HDZ, which would likely need more than one partner to retain power after 2007 elections. Internationally, the HSP continues its efforts to achieve full legitimacy, seeking especially U.S. acknowledgement of its transformation. To this end, HSP Party President Anto Djapic has repeatedly expressed a desire for closer ties with the U.S., even endorsing a widely unpopular Article 98 agreement.

¶2. (SBU) Although HDZ and HSP frequently share power at the local level, the international community's reservations about the HSP's nationalist roots make HDZ reluctant to embrace it as a main national partner until it gains wider international acceptance. Ironically, such recognition would likely boost HSP ratings at the expense of the HDZ, as both parties appeal to right-wingers. This could be why the HDZ has yet to endorse HSP membership in the European People's Party (EPP). The two parties need each other -- and probably other smaller parties -- if they want to rule the country after the 2007 parliamentary elections. HSP's main usefulness to HDZ has been siphoning off the hard-right, allowing HDZ to move to the center. This alliance has had the additional effect of moderating HSP's leadership, because further appeal to the hard-right will hurt HSP's chances of true power-sharing at the national level. End Summary and comment.

UP AND DOWN IN THE POLLS

¶3. (U) A comprehensive survey commissioned by the International Republican Institute (IRI) found in early September that the Croatian Party of Rights (HSP) would win ten percent of the vote if parliamentary elections were held then. This was a clear drop from the 11 percent high earlier in the year, however was still an increase from the eight percent low earlier in summer 2006. Of the two counties and one major city where early elections were held in April 2006, the HSP only made the five-percent threshold in one. There are at least two reasons why HSP's standing was so weak during the past six months. The by-elections in April were, for the most part, due to HSP councilors switching sides in local assemblies. This created the popular perception that HSP was simply pursuing its own interests rather than acting upon higher principles.

¶4. (U) During the summer of 2006, the local media reported dissatisfaction among a group of more "urban" HSP-ers supporting MP Miroslav Rozic. This situation climaxed in August when Rozic

publicly criticized Djapic for surrounding himself with yes-men. In the end, Rozic was disciplined, had to resign from a number of party posts, and was allowed to stay in the party presidency in exchange for retracting his criticism of Djapic. With idyll restored, the party could again turn to its overarching goal: getting ready to finally come to power after spending 16 years in opposition.

15. (U) The same IRI poll also found that the HSP was the only political party whose voters wanted a coalition with the ruling HDZ. The voters of all other parties - including those currently in the ruling coalition, such as the HSLS - prefer some of the opposition parties as their partners. These findings place the HSP in the position of a solid political party that the HDZ simply cannot avoid or ignore as it prepares for the elections due in November 2007. Moreover, if the HSP does become number two in a future right-of-center coalition, it will seek to be more than just a "dcor": "We want to be policy makers in that government," Djapic told the Embassy earlier this year and that goal certainly has not changed. Djapic also explained at the time that Prime Minister and HDZ President Sanader had openly told him he didn't want the HSP to grow above ten percent, because that would bring his party enough seats in parliament to make them more than just a junior partner in a possible coalition with the HDZ. What strategy and agenda the HSP will choose for the election year, however, will be clearer after the party convention expected to take place in late November or early December.

SLIPPING OFF SCRIPT: DJAPIC'S NATIONALIST RHETORIC

16. (U) Djapic and HSP are likely to spice up their rhetoric - carefully - as elections approach. For example, the Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) recently challenged the Croatian Government's motion to be granted status as a "friend of the court" in war crimes cases against several Croatian generals. Djapic demanded a strong

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reaction from the government, or threatened that the HSP would ask for a parliamentary debate on cooperation with the ICTY. Similarly, commenting on the expected release of Zvonimir Busic from a U.S. prison where he is serving time for hijacking a commercial airliner and killing a U.S. policeman in the 1970s (while attempting to promote Croatian independence), Djapic said that Busic should be welcomed home as a Croatian freedom fighter. At the same time, Djapic continues to balance such rhetoric with more progressive ideas and projects, such as helping the Moslem community build a mosque in Osijek where he currently serves as the mayor. While hot rhetoric is used to attract voters, the moderate moves are intended for the international community, which is still skeptical about the depth of changes this former ultra-nationalist party has undergone.

COURTING THE U.S.

17. (U) In his public appearances, Djapic continues to promote the need for closer ties with the United States. After visiting the U.S. in March, Djapic returned to Washington in September where he met with Stephen Rademaker, former Assistant Secretary of State. During his meeting with Rademaker, Djapic argued that Croatia should sign an Article 98 agreement with the United States. According to Djapic, this would help Croatia join NATO more easily, and could also generate U.S. assistance in the defense of former Croatian General Ante Gotovina, who is currently being tried in the ICTY for alleged war crimes committed in 1995 during Operation Storm. It is generally believed that the main purpose of initiatives like this is to secure full American recognition for his party. Without such recognition, some believe it would be difficult for the HDZ to enter a national-level coalition with the HSP.

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